

SHORT STORY

Before The Monsoons Come (Part I of III)

MAHMUD RAHMAN

In the heat of the summer afternoon, even the pie dogs have slunk away to find shade. Sweating inside his thin shirt and lungi, Moni feels that if people, like dogs, had as little care in the world, they too would rather be napping. But little Galachipa is a river port that buzzes into life whenever the motor launches arrive or depart, and within minutes, the two vessels moored at the ghat will switch on their engines and cast off. Moni will be a passenger on one of them.

He could have boarded by now, but he is finishing off the last bite of the soft flesh of a dab. While he chews, he watches passengers rush on board with their bundles and bedrolls, the gangplanks straining beneath their feet.

Back on Naodubi island, Moni's mother would have wrapped up her class by now. On any other day she would be eating lunch, but today she goes without. When he parted from her at dawn, there was no food left. He will return in the early evening with rice, dal, cooking oil, a few odds and ends, and if he's lucky enough to get a fish on one of the stops on his journey, they may yet share a satisfying meal tonight. She had insisted that he promise to eat something at midday, but Moni could not see himself eating while his mother went hungry. The heat however forced him to buy a refreshing green coconut.

He hears a man call out to him, "Brother, you should come on board now." It is Ahsan, the boy who assists the pilot of the smaller of the two launches. He remembers Moni from this morning as well as earlier trips Moni has made.

The larger boat, a two-decker, will head upriver to Patuakhali and eventually reach Barisal by midnight. Moni reads its name, the MV Bakerganj. The launch looks ancient, with its peeling paint and a thick crust of rust on its battered hull. It would be simple for Moni to board the larger boat. He has the money for the ticket. At Barisal, he could switch to a different launch back to Dhaka, or perhaps he would only go as far as Chandpur. That would put him closer to the border with Tripura. A bus ride would put him within twenty miles of the border, and he could walk the rest.

His mother had made him promise to return. Why did she think he might not come back? Had he not loyally stood by her side for the last two months? She knows he is unhappy being stuck down there, but how could she possibly think he would leave her? The memory of that distrust makes him angry. It makes him want to take the MV Bakerganj.

Ahsan shouts at him one more time. "We are about to go." Grabbing his bags, Moni rises to his feet and hurries toward the boats.

The two-story school building, made of brick and concrete, was built to withstand winds of up to 150 miles an hour. In November when the cyclone had smashed across the southern delta, with a tidal wave that washed away the mud-and-bamboo dwellings of the villagers, the school building stood intact. Those lucky enough to live nearby crowded for shelter inside its classrooms. They survived.

Six months later, a room on the second floor would provide shelter to Moni and his mother running from a different storm. Outsiders here, with no family ties connecting them to Naodubi, they ended up

here because of a simple bond created in the wake of the storm. If we can return the kindness one day...

Moni had rushed here after the cyclone, a volunteer on the first boat carrying relief supplies from Dhaka. Unable to make sense of what lay before them, one of his comrades began to take snapshots. In a rare fit of rage, Moni ripped the film out of the camera. The images of bodies without a shred of skin on them, many still clutching tree trunks, would forever be etched in his mind. They did not need to hoard the tragedy on photo paper. Their mission here was to signal hope: they had brought food, clothing, and basic medicines. It was hardly enough. Moni returned, with a second, then a third, boatload of volunteers. Mostly high school and college students like him who could not sit still in classrooms at a time like this.

When Moni would arrive later with his mother, they extended the villagers another simple bond: You provided us with shelter. We can teach you and your children how to read and write. Although the government had built the school seven years earlier, just before an election, its support for teachers had never really come through. The last teacher had left more than a year ago.

Within days, mother and son established a daily routine. They taught children in the morning, adults in the late afternoon. Sometimes their classes numbered a dozen or more, but usually it was only a handful. They improvised their syllabus, teaching the alphabet, words and stories, numbers and counting, throwing in a little history and geography whenever they could. His mother now handled arithmetic and science, and both of them shared the language skills.

They made do with one meal a day, two if the villagers shared food with them. One of the men showed Moni where to fish and every few days he added fish to their diet. They had some money, but spent it sparingly: for food, essentials such as soap, and kerosene. The cash would have to last until they decided what to do next.

One possession they brought with them was a short-wave radio and in the evening, they listened to the news from All India Radio or the BBC. They did not bother wasting precious battery power on the lies that emanated from Radio Pakistan. If they had, they would have heard that normalcy had returned all over East Pakistan, that a new provincial administration cleansed of traitors had been installed, that Islam was free of the scourge of Hindu contamination from India, and that the miscreants who dared to disturb peace and security had been vanquished.



artwork by apurba

The other stations broadcast news of villages being burned, of refugees swarming into camps across the border, and of a growing guerilla struggle the occupying army. These reports could have been the story of their own recent lives. Within days of the massacre on March 25, 1971 soldiers invaded their flat and dragged away Moni's father. He had not come back. They had come looking for Moni's older brother, a university student activist, but Belal had not been home. By now, he could be anywhere.

On the day the curfew was lifted for a few hours, his mother gathered some of their belongings and the two of them fled to her father's ancestral village, a day's journey from the city. The refuge there turned out to be brief. When little boys came running shouting about soldiers, he rushed home and once again he and his mother fled. They joined a group of Hindu refugees headed for India, but they had no family across the border and his mother did not want to end up in a refugee camp. She suggested another relative's village, further south. That place was not as welcoming and they stayed only for one week until soldiers were reported nearby. Their relatives said they had to leave. This time Moni recalled the words of the villagers on Naodubi. The monsoons would soon come and the island would be cut off from the mainland for at least two or three months. Such a tiny, isolated place could not possibly interest the military; they would be safe there.

So far their luck was holding and while their life was simple, it was also busy and could often be exhausting. When they first arrived,

mother and son would talk for hours until weariness quieted him. Then he would hear her weeping into her pillow, while all he could do was stare at the darkness with his hands clasped behind his head. He had no words to offer her. Sleep began to come easier, but the conversation between them took on more silences.

One night, Moni could not sleep. It was the stifling heat, he thought. He rose and walked out the door. Leaning against the balcony railing, he looked at the stars shining in the cloudless sky. Unlike the other villages, there was a total silence here. Not even the barking of a dog. The cyclone had not spared anyone this island.

Earlier the news from Calcutta had informed them of the launching of Free Bengal Radio. He rotated the dial until he found the signal, and they listened to the last ten minutes of a news program. A squad of young freedom fighters had destroyed an assault force of Pakistani soldiers in the northeast. A woman from the village was visiting with her son Hameed, one of Moni's pupils, and she exclaimed, "How brave our brothers are turning out to be! Who could have believed it?" Her face glowed golden brown in the light of the hurricane lamp. When she glanced in his direction, Moni was surprised to find that instead of sharing her sense of pride, he felt only the sting of shame.

All through his childhood and even into his teenage years, Moni had been called a coward. Doura, bhitu, kapurush. He knew every Bangla word for it. Even some English synonyms: spineless, crybaby, 'fraidy cat. Moni had long come to accept the label. How could he possibly contest it?

When the family doctor showed up to vaccinate the household with the TABC injection for typhoid and cholera, Moni darted out the door. But Belal was faster and dragged him back. The way Moni screamed and struggled, he made it sound like he was being taken to the gallows. Even when it became clear that he would be sacrificed to the needle, he tried to delay the inevitable by bargaining for a thinner one. While everyone got stuck with a No. 20, he held out for a No. 22.

The next day, feverish, Moni groaned as if near death. He demanded his mother's constant presence. She too was fevered, but he never thought of her condition, nor that of his brother or father. No one else could possibly be suffering as much as him!

Once when he was moaning about dying, there was a visitor in the drawing room Moni's uncle Zia, a captain in the army. Sporting a carefully groomed mustache, he held his body erect and even sitting on a sofa he looked like he was going to spring up at any moment. While he drank his tea, he lectured Moni, "Cowards die a thousand times before their death." His mother laughed. Moni pulled closer to her, even though he looked up at her in disgust. Could she not see that her brother was a tormenter of children? Years later when Moni discovered that his uncle's words came from a character in a Shakespeare play, he conceded the man a sliver of grudging respect. He was not simply a mindless soldier given to worshipping physical strength and warrior prowess. The man also read books.

Mahmud Rahman is at work on his first novel.

The 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature: Orhan Pamuk

ASRAR CHOWDHURY

"After the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the world almost forgot that Istanbul existed. The city into which I was born was poorer, shabbier, and more isolated than it had ever been in its two-thousand-year history. For me it has always been a city of ruins and of end-of-empire melancholy. I've spent my life either battling with this melancholy, or (like all Istanbulis) making it my own..."

-- Orhan Pamuk, in *Istanbul: Memories of a City*



recipients in this genre. The Nobel Committee neatly summed up his lifetime achievement by declaring that "in the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city [Istanbul he] has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures."

Turkey stands at the crossroads of numerous world cultures and empires--Europe to the West, Arabia and Egypt to the South, and Persia to the East--while itself being a part of the ancient Byzantine civilization. Istanbul, Constantinople, and the many names and faces this great metropolis has acquired over millennia lies at the heart of the works of this year's Nobel Prize winner in literature, Orhan Pamuk. Only 54, Pamuk is one of the youngest

The central, recurring theme of Pamuk's works is the clash of the old, magnificent civilizations. His works have received both critical and commercial success inside and outside Turkey. Leaving his predecessor, the great storyteller, Yashar Kemal, behind, Orhan goes a step fur-

ther in 'questioning' and exploring the identity and transformation of Turkey from Ottoman times.

Orhan Pamuk was born in 1952 in Istanbul into a well-off westernized family. Like Naguib Mahfouz in Cairo, Pamuk has spent almost his entire life in his native city, Istanbul. Orhan was initially trained as an architect, but later gave up architecture for full-time writing. It was his *The White Castle* that first attracted critical attention. However, by then he had already become a 'publishing phenomenon.'

The White Castle is a wonderful tale of how the East learns from the West. A young Italian scholar captured by pirates is sold to a Turkish savant who wants to learn about western scientific developments. Pamuk's genius as a master storyteller was established in his *My Name is Red*. Although comparisons are made with Calvino and Eco, this is a novel that is very much Pamuk's own. With stories within stories, it unfolds like *The Arabian Nights* and brings back to life the times of the Ottoman

Empire from the 1590s.

The Ottoman-Turkish legacy doesn't stop here. In *The Black Book*, Orhan narrates the story of an Istanbul lawyer whose pursuit of the cause of his wife's death takes its readers on a journey into contemporary Istanbul. *The New Life*--incidentally the fastest selling title in Turkish history--brilliantly captures the atmosphere of the grand Anatolia as we see how Osman, a young university student, becomes obsessed with a magical book that addresses the dangerous nature of love and the self.

Interpreting Turkey and its past may have brought Orhan national and international accolades, but it came at a cost. The book *Snow* boldly raised the question of Turkish-perpetrated genocides of the Armenian and Kurdish nations during the First World War--a taboo subject in contemporary Turkey. The authorities promptly put him on trial for "publicly denigrating Turkishness." Fortunately, Orhan survived the ordeal.

The recurring theme of Orhan's novels is Istanbul. The

city is his obsession, tinged with a melancholia akin to that of the great Mughal poets, Mir, Sauda, and Mir Hasan, who, like Orhan, were also born at a time when the old, glorious order was decaying.

Pamuk's work raises singular questions: How will modern Turkey strike a balance between Secularism and Islam? What relevance does its Ottoman past have that can reflect on the present and the future? But like a master storyteller Orhan refuses to give easy answers. He lets the reader form their view.

Now that Naguib Mahfouz and Orhan Pamuk have won the Nobel Prize in Literature, are there any more worthy writers from that part of the world? Should one dare a prediction? Perhaps it'll be the Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf. That's the subject matter of another day.

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Book Review
Fragmented history

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Partitions by Kamleshwar (Translated from the Hindi by Ameena Kazi Ansari) ; Delhi:Penguin Books; Rs. 350; pp.367

Politics does more than leave countries divided. It cuts through the souls of individuals and societies. You can call these divisions Bantustans, which Kamleshwar does not. Or you can look upon them as so many Pakistans that leave arteries and veins bleeding from the ravages of unwise politics. It is the symbolism which matters in this work, one that raises all sorts of questions about the nature of man and the tenor of the politics he has pursued, and perhaps continues to pursue, in his assessment of the trauma that came over India in 1947. Kamleshwar uses the symbolism to good effect, almost like a gleaming, pitiless knife to plunge the truth into wounds that have not quite healed. The wounds, because of the knitting, only tend to ooze fresh spurts of blood.

Partitions is therefore all about hurt, about the sense of historical loss. The writer clearly takes the vivisection of India in the 1940s as a point of reference to explain all the other partitions that have occurred throughout the long stretches of history. It follows then that the narrative is an allegory that seeks to explain the human condition through zeroing in on human folly. The American Barbara Tuchman, who once expounded on the march of folly from Troy to Vietnam in a work that remains seminal, would have recoiled from Kamleshwar's even more raw observation of life and its mutilation at the hands of history. But life, with a capital L, is again what the Aadeeb -- judge, scholar, lover, thinker and one of us -- makes it out to be. You could be forgiven for thinking the aadeeb, or call him the voice of human conscience, approaches the issues from the Olympian heights of boredom. He really does not; he merely looks down with disdain at the way men of power have carried themselves through the centuries. There is a certain magical quality that Kamleshwar brings into the work, through letting the aadeeb connect with the past, the purpose being to explain the present, or whatever soiled parts are brought under microscopic study.

And thus the flesh and bones of the thousands upon thousands of dead rise from their graves or emerge from their funeral pyres to complain of the ignominies they were put to in the times they walked the earth. That thin, fearsome thread of ancient religious strife -- one did not call it communalism then -- runs through the tales. Do invasions by foreigners always lead to a battering of the soul? Babar, otherwise known as the founder of the Mughal empire, is not quite aware of why he must be summoned before the aadeeb to answer to charges of modern-day religious fratricide. He only conquered India when there was no kingdom left for him, in Ferghana or elsewhere, to preside over. The dynasty he gave birth to never developed roots in the subcontinent and yet left its indelible impressions on the Indian psyche. That is what enraged ardent indigenous Indians like Sivaji, whose goal in life was to harass the puritan Aurangzeb to the end of the latter's days. Could that have been the earliest stage in the Pakistanisation of life in India?

Such questions are left hanging heavily in the air, though a reasonably good degree of misery comes in remembering the perfidy, the poet Iqbal



PARTITIONS

a novel
KAMLESHWAR

may have committed when he raised his voice in support of a homeland for India's Muslims. Was he not the man who sang *Sare jahan se accha yeh Hindustan hamara*, et cetera, et cetera? He most certainly was, but then, that is what history is all about. It changes men in as much as it transforms or mutilates history. The Portuguese and the Dutch and the French all move at brisk pace through this allegorical narrative of history; and then they are overshadowed by the shrewdest of these foreigners, the English. The landscape of history takes on strange new shapes and hues, with newer sets of foreigners barging in to push earlier ones to the fringes.

Do not forget, though, that in all this exposition of human psychology and nationalist-religious politics across time, there are the moments when love between man and woman, transcending the barriers put up by stubborn faith, sprouts in the unlikelyst of places. The Muslim Salma and the Hindu aadeeb stroll along the beaches, bathe in lunar light and then give themselves over to raw, carnal passion. There could be a moral here, or a simple fact of sociological history: despite the broken fragments of history littering our world, it is the heart that continues beating through the sensuality of woman and the ardour of man.

Partitions is what you have known all along. It is a fragmentation of civilization, a severe wounding of it. On a certain plane, it elevates relationships. Watch, though, how Mahmood Ali the peon, conflict-free, links the disturbed ones through their upheavals. The allegory is all.

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The 2006 Man Booker Prize: Kiran Desai

SALMA RIDHAK

According to newspaper accounts Kiran Desai's mother Anita Desai (herself short-listed thrice for the Booker) was in Dehra Dun when she was shaken awake at 5:00 in the morning. "You'd better see this," her sister-in-law yelled excitedly. On the television screen Anita Desai saw her daughter in London accept the 2006 Booker prize for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. Kiran said: "To my mother, I owe a debt so profound and so great that this book feels as much hers as it does mine. It was written...in her wisdom and kindness, in cold winters in her house when I was in pieces. I really owe her this book so enormously."

It was a sentiment that found immense favor with my father, who considers Anita Desai's *In Custody* as one of the best English-language novels to come out of India. Made into a movie (available at my local Blockbuster video store), its subject was the decline of Urdu in post-independence India, a language that became hostage to linguistic



politics, ethnicity and religion. *In Custody* was short-listed for the Booker in 1984, but as my father insistently declares, "They gave it to the wrong Anita," meaning Anita Brookner, whose entry *Hotel du Lac* waltzed away with the prize. But then my father's what sportscasters here call a die-hard fan.

It seems apt that Anita Desai was at Dehra Dun when news came of Kiran and the Booker prize. For though *The Inheritance of Loss* begins, and ends, in Kalimpong in Bengal, on the slopes of the northeastern Himalayas, to anyone who has been to those parts of India, as I have, the book's atmosphere

and dominant mood is of the country's old hill stations, of Mussorie (the haunts of the writer Ruskin Bond), of the old Naini Tal, but now gone to seed, ruined beyond recognition. There is the retired judge embittered and isolated by his Anglicization, his orphaned granddaughter Sai, Sai's tutor and lover Gyan (who leaves her for the Gurkha Liberation Front), two eccentric sisters, the judge's cook, and the cook's son Biju, who has fled from Kalimpong to Manhattan in search of a better life. It is a world long past the Merchant-Ivory confections, where the old certainties are fled, a world where the cruelties of colonialism have been replaced by the cruelties of globalization. It is a world she writes about with a coolly unsentimental eye, and which no doubt led the Times Literary Supplement reviewer to say that the book's vision is "morose."

The novel's sympathies are with the poor, for the vast underclass on whose backs rests the world's thin crust of neon glamour: the judge's cook is the latest in a long line of

"porters (who) had carried boulders from the riverbeds growing bands, ribs curving into caves, backs into U's, faces being bent slowly to look always at the ground." His son Biju leads the haunted existence of the illegal immigrant in America, a life in the lower depths of fancy restaurant kitchens which were "perfectly first-world on top, perfectly third-world twenty-two steps below." The judge has been twisted by his encounter with white England, while the death of Sai's parents symbolizes the pitiable end of Indo-Soviet friendship.

Kiran moves easily from New York to Gujarat, from Nepali nightwatchmen to the "Indian women of the English-speaking upper educated" with their "self-righteousness," from snake worship to the ice-bound Hudson river. Her choice of Kalimpong for the book's opening scene is a brilliant one, since it enables her to exhibit her marvelous, highly individual style:

"All day, the colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed

of ocean shadows and depths. Briefly visible above the vapor, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by the storms at its summit."

The standard never falls throughout a 324-page book. The same linguistic felicity had been exhibited by her in her first book, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, but that had been a very, satiric effort in the magical realism mode. In the eight years since then she has come of age. Kiran Desai is 35 years old, the youngest woman to win the Booker. One feels safe in predicting that a few more surprises seem to be in store for us. And for my father, who said after finishing the book: "Almost as good as her mother."

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